Dr. Comer (kcomer@rice.edu)
Office: Herring Hall 317
Spring 2020

Class: M 6:30-9:20p
Office Hours: T 2-4 + by appt.
Classroom: HUMA 119

English 397 Literary Houston

Satisfies: Critical Race, Postcolonial, Gender Requirement for English Major
Latin American Studies Major Elective

This course is open to majors and non-majors. We venture together into Houston's literary and art scenes in order to think about the economic marketplaces of American cultural institutions as well as their celebrated figures. Our course meets on Monday evenings, and during two (2) meetings, we attend readings at the Alley Theatre sponsored by Houston's premier literary arts organization, Inprint. As a high quality, donor-funded, and well-led organization that brings writers to Houston from all over the world, Inprint offers a key context for discussions of local literary institutions. But Houston also supports a thriving grassroots literary world. To think comparatively about Houston's multiple literary marketplaces, we acquaint ourselves with less-known venues and writing communities including Nuestra Palabra: Latino Writers Having Their Say, and the Houston Writers Coalition.

Comparative considerations allow us to engage Houston civic character and creative arts in its broadest formulation while researching current policy discussions in the city related to budgets for literary and arts spending. Where do our tax dollars go? For organizations not donor-funded, how is public funding distributed? We investigate economic factors creating the literary marketplaces we do or don't readily see, and ask how such decisions impact writers and the people who make up the communities from which less-known work emerges? By course end, we will be able to think more capably about Houston's particular urban literary history, as well as why certain writers rise to attention. What combinations of aesthetic and political conditions create who we read and admire? Our final project compiles student research about local literary organizations into a public document "Mapping Literary History" for Houston city officials.

Class Speakers. Rich Levy, Executive Director, Inprint; Tony Diaz, Director, Nuestra Palabra: Latino Writers Having Their Say.

Required Readings. Bryan Washington's *Lot: Stories* and Mario Alberto Zambrano's *Lotería: A Novel (PS)*. Inprint visitors including Forchè, Machado, and Erdrich. On writing about Houston, we read cultural critics, writers, and theorists including: Guzman, Byrd, Barthelme, Guerard, Huxtable, de Menil, Lopate, Walsh, Dermont, Johnson, Contreras Schwartz, Thomas, Diaz, Levy.

Required Field Trip: Houston's East End. Chicano/a murals, Ship Channel, Talento Bilingue.

For generous support of our course emphasis on public scholarship:
Many thanks to the Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning (CERCL)

Course Objectives – Students will be able to

- build on program objectives of the English major related to critical reading and writing, knowledge of genre, literary and cultural history, interdisciplinarity, and culture and social change area of specialization
- combine analysis of a body of literary or film materials with a critical approach informed by reading in secondary literary criticism, theory, and/or historical or social contexts
- demonstrate significance of geographical location, region/place, to literary and critical concerns related to economies of cultural production
- identify specific sites of critical race, indigenous, and feminist inquiry as of key importance to issues of literary marketplace and its various public audiences
- exhibit familiarity with concepts of public humanities and public-facing research and writing practices as a framework for creating knowledges about literary Houston
- develop analytic writing skills and sustained argument specifically in contexts of small groups which, together, produce a longer critical paper suitable for public non-specialist readers
- practice writing and speaking in accessible language that can translate complex concepts and theoretical claims for the general public

Assignments: Readings/Events Responses, Short Paper, Longer Collaborative Paper.

- **Responses to Readings/Events, 15% of grade.** Two short writing reflections, focused on "Responses to Readings/Events" (2-3 pages). Feb 7, Feb 24. Handout.
- **Papers:** One 5-6 page paper, one longer paper of 8-10 pages written in small group contexts. Paper Proposal (1 page) due on April 3. The longer papers will be combined into one document for presentation to City of Houston officials.
- **Shorter Paper (5-6 pages), 25% of grade.** Students write individually on one of the communities and writers we study. This paper is a literary critical reading of a writer that also utilizes the critical economic and experiential thinking the course practices. Papers should address issues of "Why Houston," that is, how does the writer claim or make use of Houston as a literary landscape? Handout posted to Canvas.
- **Field Trip March 28.** 10:00-1:30. East End. Murals, Ship Channel, lunch at Don Carlos.
- **Final Assignment "Mapping Houston: Public-Facing Research." Longer Research Paper (8-10 pages), 35% of grade.** Working in small groups, students identify a literary arts organization they wish to learn more about. They read about it, contact one of its leaders, and write 8-10 pages of its history, contributions to Houston culture, the challenges it faces, and strategies for longevity. Due May 6 (last day of exams). Professor Comer will then combine the work of the small groups and prepare a final document for presentation to City of Houston officials. Student participation in these final stages is invited.
- **Real Time Presence in Class & Events (25% of grade).** Readings, class, field trip.
- **Revision Policy.** Revising papers to improve writing is allowed. Guidelines given in class.
- **Canvas Postings.** Please note asterisk "*" means readings/assignments posted to Canvas.

Disability Accommodation

Rice University is committed to equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities. In keeping with the university's mission to provide an unsurpassed education, Disability Support Services (DSS) provides accommodations and support services. If you have a registered need, please see me and I will accommodate you; also, be sure to visit DSS.

Policy on Electronic Devices in the Classroom

Laptops and cell phones are permitted in the classroom but their use must be educational. Refrain from checking email, text messages or social media accounts. Violations get grade reductions.

Honor Code

University policy requires Rice faculty to report suspected violations of the Honor Code to the Honor Council. Be sure to cite any source you use, especially in this age of Internet research.

Policy on attendance and late arrival. **ALWAYS COME TO CLASS**.

It's always best to come to class, even if you are tired, late, or underprepared. You will always do better in our or any class if you attend regularly. This is especially true during the most hectic parts of the semester.

Office Hours

Please note office hours on page 1. If you are unable to make those hours, let me know other times good for you. If you want to talk about the class, your writing, an assignment, the English or SWGS majors, or some other matter, please visit. If you need assistance, sooner is usually better than later.

Part I: Placing Ourselves | Critical Contexts

Week 1

Jan 13 M Course Design. Introductions. Houston in Literature and Culture

Where are We? Defining "Literary Marketplaces"

- Acknowledgements. Karankawan ancestral homelands (today's Western Gulf Coast)
- Beyond "literary appreciation" toward markets, economies, celebrity
    - Drawing on Jay, "The Engaged Humanities" (2010)
    - Houston as "*the* city of the second half of the 20th century" (Ada Huxtable)
    - Houston as "a strangely non-imposing environment" (Philip Lopate)
    - Forchè, "The Colonel" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXMbpFvCWMs

Week 2

Jan 20 M MLK Holiday (no class, but please note reading below for this week)

- Prepare for Inprint Reading at Alley Theatre next week 1.27
  - Read Below Selections from Forchè and Machado (on Canvas)

  - Forchè, "In Salvador: 1978-80," from *The Country Between Us* (8-26)
  - Forchè, Introduction, "Against Forgetting, Poetry of Witness"
  - Machado, stories. "The Husband Stitch" and "Eight Bites"

Week 3

Jan 27 M Literary Reading #1 @ Alley Theatre
Carolyn Forchè and Carmen Maria Machado

Bus Pick Up Curbside at Classroom (we go as group)
Inprint Event Information. https://inprinthouston.org/event/inprint-carolyn-forche-carmen-maria-machado-reading/

Part II: Houston Coming of Age

Week 4

Feb 3 M Houston as the Future, The Longer View (Cultural Criticism)

- Discussion of Alley Theatre Event + Forchè and Machado Readings

- Read: Very Brief Selections, David Theis, ed. *Literary Houston: An Anthology* (2010)
  - "Introduction" (2010)
  - *Syg Byrd's Houston*: Catfish Reef (1955)
  - Donald Barthelme, from *Texas Observer* (1960)
  - Albert Guerard, *Touch of Time: Myth, Memory, the Self, Houston 1924-72* (1980)
  - Ada Huxtable, "Deep in the Heart of Nowhere" (1975)
  - Dominique Browning (on Dominique de Menil) 1980
  - Philip Lopate, from *Against Joie de Vivre : Houston Hide-and-Seek* (1989)
  - Robb Walsh, "Guess Who's Cooking Your Dinner?" (2007) (on Hugo Ortega)

DUE FRIDAY Feb 7: Synthesize Reading and Events: Response Paper (2-3 pages). See Handout.

Week 5

Feb 10 M Suddenly, Black & Brown Houston. And More.

- Bryan Washington, *Lot: Stories* (2019).

    - Focus: “Lockwood,” “Alief,” “610 North 610 West,” “Shepherd,” “Wayside,” “Lot,” “Waugh.”
- Dwight Garner, “*Lot* Offers Fictional Look at a Vibrant, Polyglot American City,” NYT
- John *Márquez*, “Hybrid Subjectivities,” from *Black-Brown Solidarity: Racial Politics in the New Gulf South* (2014) 1-31.

Week 6

Feb 17 M Infrastructures I. Latinx Arts and Talento Bilingue: What’s Next?

- Guest Speaker Tony Diaz. Founder, Nuestra Palabra: Latino Writers Having Their Say
- Talento Bilingue of Houston, Historic Latino Arts Center, “On Verge of Insolvency” https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/Latinos-demand-government-support-to-save-14405775.php
- “The State of Houston’s Latinx Art 2019,” Prepared by the Mayor’s Hispanic Advisory Board Arts Committee & the Latino Legacy Arts Groups Coalition, Tony Diaz, Co-Chair

Week 7

Feb 24 M Infrastructures II. Inprint: Luminary Visitors & Programs In-Town

- Guest Speaker Rich Levy, Inprint Director
- Study Inprint Houston. Devise questions about Inprint’s mission, legacy, future.

- **Due**: Response to Readings/Events (2-3 pages). See Handout.

Week 8

March 2 M Houston as a Literary City I.

- Amber Dermont, “Damage Control” from *Damage Control: Stories* (2013)
- Lacy Johnson, “The Flood,” from *The Reckonings*: *Essays* (2018)
- Leslie Contreras Schwartz, Selected Poems.
- Lorenzo Thomas, “Liquid City” (1984)
- Tony Diaz, “A Night at the Opera” (2008)
- Rich Levy, “Main Street, Dusk” (2000)

- Additional Readings TBA (student suggestions informed by Paper 1).

Week 9

March 9 Literary Reading #2 at Alley Theatre (bus pick up curbside)
Louise Erdrich (Ojibwa). Inprint Info:

DUE FRIDAY March 13 Short Paper 1 (5-6 pages)

Week 10
March 16 M Spring Recess No Class

Part III: Toward Public Scholarship
Synthesis of Writing & Infrastructures

Week 11
March 23 M Houston's East End

- Mario Alberto Zambrano, Lotería: A Novel (P.S.) 2014
- Establish Small Groups & Organizational Outreach Plan

Saturday March 28. 10am-1:30p (Rice chartered bus)
Field Trip to Houston's East End, with Professor José Aranda
Talento Bilingue, Chicano/a Murals, Ship Channel, Lunch @ Don Carlos.
THANKS to CERCL (Center for Engaged Research and Collaborative Learning)

Week 12
March 30 M Houston as a Literary City, II

- Additional Reading related to Final Projects. Reading TBA.
- Small Groups Report on Organizational Contacts.

Due: Friday April 3, Paper Proposal. See Handout.

Week 13
April 6 M Models for our Final Project

- Learning from Other Literary Cities
- Discussion Public Writing
- Small Groups Timelines for Meeting with Contact, Additional Research, Writing.

Week 14
April 13 M In-class Small Group Meetings.

Week 15
April 20 M Workshop Drafts of Final Projects. Small Group Presentations.

Meet April 27 (during Dead Days). Time TBA. Review of Projects, Professor Advising, Small Group Meeting Time & Document Revision.